



1 Peter 3:18-4:6
Christ's Suffering Produces Blessing For Us

Summary: In one of the most hard-to-understand passages in the Bible one thing is clear: Christ's suffering produces blessing for us.

Do you know that God loves you? Do you know that He expressed that love through suffering? When you look at the cross, do you understand that was an intentional, willing, act of love and suffering that Jesus endured for you?

There are a lot of people trying to figure out their place in this world – everyone from teenagers to retirees, to divorcees, and widows – it's not just people in mid-life going through a crisis – it seems like everyone is trying to figure out who am I? Why am I here? And what is life about? What makes my life matter?

Well, I can give you the answer the church has put forward for centuries – you're here to know God and enjoy Him forever. Your life has divine purpose. And you, personally, are an object of divine affection. Do you know that? Do you believe that? Does that matter to you? You know that Jesus died on the cross, it's hard to miss that no matter how little you know about the Christian faith, but do you know He did that for you?

Read with me

1 Peter 3:18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,

And then look with me at

1 Peter 4:1 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind,

Do you notice the big idea? Jesus, suffered for us. And if the Son of God suffered for you, I would argue that means you matter. You are seen, you are noticed by God, you have a purpose and a place, even when life hurts – because, remember, that's the people Peter is writing to – people whose life hurts. And he's telling them, when your life hurts, when you wonder why bad things are happening to you, remember: Jesus suffered for you.

It might not be the answer you want, but it's the answer you need. You may never understand why God allowed this or that bad thing to happen, you may never understand why God allowed someone so mean, so selfish, so unjust or evil, to be in a position of authority over you, or to influence your life, but you can know this: Christ suffered for you. He was absolutely perfect, absolutely innocent, and He suffered too. Know that. Trust that.

Rest in that. Ask God to press that truth into your soul. Christ suffered too, and He suffered for you, and me.

That's the big idea – that's what we want to latch onto this morning. But in explaining and expanding that idea Peter says some things that are really hard to understand - in fact, most of the commentators and scholars I consulted say this is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire New Testament, so Happy Mother's Day!

Martin Luther said this section of 1 Peter was:

A wonderful little text ... [but] more obscure ... than any other in the Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty what Peter means...I cannot understand and I cannot explain it. And there has been no one who has explained it.

Which is brilliant because Peter is the one who says that some of the stuff Paul writes is “hard to understand” (**2 Peter 3:16**) and gets twisted by people.

So, we're going to work our way through the passage and try to stay on the main trail. I'll point out five confusing parts and give you some thoughts on them, and then we'll end by circling back to focus on the main thing, which is Peter encouraging us to remember what Christ has done for us and we'll have five points about that too. It is a complex and confusing passage, there are a few of them in Scripture, but it's God's Word to us and the most important message is absolutely clear.

Read with me again,

1 Peter 3:18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,

Christ suffered for us – He actually suffered to the point of physical death, though He was alive in the Spirit. That's pretty clear, right? But now, this:

19 by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, **20** who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

Here is our first major source of confusion. What is Peter saying and what does he mean?

The part about Noah is clear, we understand that – you can read the story in Genesis 6. Wickedness was rampant, so God told Noah to build an ark and then judged the world with a flood. Noah took his wife and his three sons and their wives onboard along with the animals to escape the judgement and we've been decorating nurseries with arks and rainbows ever since. So see, this really is a Mother's Day sermon!

It's not a sermon on Genesis 6 though, and yet, I can't resist telling you something, especially since we talked last week about having answers for what you believe and why. So did you know anthropologists have found accounts of the flood recorded among hundreds of people groups spread all over the globe? Probably the most famous is the Epic of Gilgamesh from modern day Iraq which shares a lot in common with the Biblical account, though it also contains some significant differences.

That's not the only version though, in his commentary on Genesis James Boice specifically cites the legends of the Samo-Kubo tribe of New Guinea, the Athapascan Indians of the Pacific Northwest, the Papago Indians of Arizona, Brazilian tribes, Peruvian Indians, African Hottentots, natives of Greenland and Hawaii, Hindus, Chinese, Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, Australian aborigines, the Welsh, Celts, Druids, Siberians, and Lithuanians all have legends of a catastrophic flood in their ancient past.

All in all, more than 200 cultures have their own account of a catastrophe involving water:

- 95% say the sole cause of the catastrophe is a flood
- 88% describe a favored family
- 70% attribute survival to a boat
- 67% record that animals are also saved
- 66% say that the disaster is due to man's wickedness
- 57% describe survivors that end up on a mountain
- Many of the accounts also specifically mention birds being sent out, a rainbow, and eight persons being saved

If everyone on earth today can trace their lineage back not only to Adam, but also through Noah and his sons, then we shouldn't be surprised to find accounts of the flood and a Creator God spread across the world, which is exactly what we do find, though the details seem to become corrupted from the Biblical account.

OK, but our passage says something about the flood and [preaching to spirits in prison](#). What's going on there? The answer is: no one really knows. But, if you want to evaluate the possible answers, you need to consider four questions:

- Where did Christ go?
- When did He go there?
- What did He say? And,
- To whom did He speak?

The answers generally fall into three main categories. First, some say Jesus preached to those who died in the flood. The flood was an act of God's judgment on the world and sin, and so Jesus went and preached to those who died. And you have two variations on this: one, He was preaching the gospel to them and offering a second chance at salvation. That sounds nice, but most serious scholars doubt it, one study Bible says it's "at best unlikely, at worst misleading" (Nelson Study Bible footnote) because there is nowhere else in Scripture where a second chance at salvation is mentioned. In fact, Scripture is quite clear about the opposite – you have one life, and then the judgment. There is one chance at salvation. The

other option is that His preaching was more of a declaration of His own triumph over sin and judgment, that just as Noah had been saved by the Ark, now all men could be saved by the cross. So, according to this view, Jesus is telling those who died what happened next, how the temporary salvation from the flood through the ark culminated in eternal salvation through the cross.

The second category is the family of views that say Jesus preached to people *through Noah* before the flood, just like God speaks through you today. Noah's neighbors weren't literally prisoners at that time, but they were figuratively slaves to sin and God used his life and speech to communicate coming judgment and the offer of salvation in the ark.

The third category is the variety of views that essentially say fallen angels were involved in some of what happened in Noah's day, and Jesus preached to them – again, not offering salvation, but declaring His triumph and victory. This is supported by some things we read in 2 Peter, Jude, and Genesis 6.

Which one is right? I don't know. But, it doesn't take anything away from our main thought – that Jesus suffered, and then apparently went some where and told some group of people something about it.

I wish I could tell you the complicated stuff was over, but it's not. Because since we're already talking about Noah, that reminds Peter of something else – the way God poured out judgment and washed away the sins of the earth but saved Noah – that's kind of like the way God saves us from judgment and washes away our sins as pictured in baptism, but it's also the second confusing part of our passage. Peter writes:

21 There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.

Now mom, you have great memories of giving your kids a bath – whether they were a cute little baby that you held onto gently or a muddy mess you hosed down in the back yard before letting them in the house. And you understand that water may have remove the filth of the flesh but it never cleansed their souls. You know it's hard to produce better behavior with nothing more than a bath, right? See this is a Mother's Day sermon!

Seriously though, what Peter is saying is clear – we understand the resurrection, we understand Christ's authority in heaven, we understand that baptism is not just about washing the funk off your flesh, only his connection is a little confusing - what's this thing about Noah? That's where there is some disagreement among theologians and scholars. So, again we're going to stay on the main path and keep moving because Peter comes right back to his main idea in the next verse.

1 Peter 4:1 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind,

Can we see, and agree, this much is clear: Peter is pointing us back to what we have called derivative submission fueled by defiant faith. We base our interactions and relationships on earth in what we know of Jesus. And since He suffered on earth, we should be prepared to do that too, when necessary.

But now get ready for another confusing connection – number three if you’re counting:

for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² that he no longer should live the rest of *his* time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

OK, what does that mean? We’ll talk about it more in just a minute, but let’s finish the thought:

³ For we *have spent* enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles— when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. ⁴ In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with *them* in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of *you*. ⁵ They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

This much is clear – Peter says there are two ways to live, you can be driven by your passions or by God’s commandments. And, he says, there can be crossover between the two – so you could live a life that is driven by what you want, what you feel like, you can live a life that just follows the crowds and goes along with what everyone else is doing, but you can also repent – you can change. You can give that up and follow Christ instead. You can stop living for your lusts and live for God. You can, and you should.

But when you do, the people you used to call friends are going to think you’re strange. They might even say mean things about you. It will lead to some uncomfortable situations socially. I know. I told you last week about my time in the Marine Corps, I remember what it was like to be on TDY with guys you work with, traveling for business you might say, and you only have one rental car between you. And you all need to go out for dinner but then the other guys want to go do some stuff you don’t want to participate in.

Do you ask them to take you back to the hotel? Do you tell you’ll go with them to dinner and then take an Uber home? Do you tell them you’ll just stay at the hotel all night and try to figure out dinner on your own? There’s only one easy thing to do – go along with the crowd. But if you have some moral objection to that, *even if you don’t make a big deal about it*, your decision not to go will stand out. And they’re going to feel judged, *even though you never said anything judgmental* - they think it strange that you do not run with *them* in the same flood of dissipation. And they may even, speak evil of *you*.

At the very least they’re going to try to talk you into going with them and you’re going to have decide: who am I trying to please here – God or men? And that’s not easy. It’s not. (Mom, do you see we’re talking about peer pressure here? You should be proud!)

Seriously though, you need to know, that Jesus knows *and understands* what you're going through. And you need to know that **5 They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.** And you're supposed to be escaping judgment by clinging to Christ. So, who, and what, are you living for?

OK, but what about this line **for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.**

It's the fourth confusing part of the passage and there are two ways to understand it. One is that it refers to Christ – that He suffered in the flesh but it gets really hard to explain what it means for Him to cease from sin since He never sinned in the first place. The other option is that it speaks of the relationship between your past – the sin that once drove you and compelled you and the fact that now, through Christ, you put the flesh and its desires to death. So now you've reoriented your life – you live for God and His desires, not your own. You live for the will of God.

Now that's not easy, and it's certainly not automatic, but it's your goal, your desire, your heart's ambition. And by God's grace and with His strength you fight to figure it out each day.

One last thing to work our way through – the fifth and final confusing connection in this section - and then we'll make five quick observations about what is crystal clear.

6 For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

What does that mean? Again, you have a couple of options. Preaching the gospel to the dead might mean people who are really dead hearing the gospel and having a second chance – but as we said earlier, that idea is not supported anywhere else in Scripture.

It could also mean that instead of offering salvation, Jesus proclaimed His victory over sin and death to those who were already dead. Or, it could mean that the gospel is proclaimed to those who are physically alive but spiritually dead. After all, the Bible says we are dead in our trespasses before the gospel brings us life. And that seems to be the most likely option – that Peter wants us to know, yes, the gospel is calling us to hard things, including submission to people we don't like, which will bring conflict and even suffering, but it's all just temporary, it is not for eternity, and Jesus knows far more about suffering for righteousness than we do.

He has **1 Peter 3:18 ... suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,**

1 Peter 4:1 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind,

I told you in the beginning the main path through this section of Scripture is clear, it's the connections that Peter makes that cause us some confusion, but the whole passage points to what Christ has done for us.

So, let's end by making five uncontroversial observations - we'll draw them mainly from 3:18.

Number one - notice that Jesus understands your suffering – He **also suffered**. As one commentator (Barclay) noted: “the suffering Christian must always remember he has a suffering lord.” You are not alone. You're not the only one.

Perhaps you remember the beautifully haunting description we receive from the prophet Isaiah describing our Messiah:

Isaiah 53:2...He has no form or comeliness;
And when we see Him,
There is no beauty that we should desire Him.
3 He is despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
And we hid, as it were, *our faces from Him;*
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

Whatever you're going through in life, no matter how hard it is, how long it lasts, or who's responsible, God knows. He understands your suffering. You are not alone. Let Him be your Comforter.

Number two, notice the purpose of Jesus' suffering – Jesus came to make us righteous by taking on our unrighteousness, **the just for the unjust**. This purpose is repeated over and over in the New Testament - death was not defeat, it was vicarious atonement, restoration between God and man.

And notice, number three, the result of His suffering - He suffered to **bring us to God**. Jesus brings us in, providing escort and entry. Some of you work in those places where you have to have a certain badge to come in or wander around. You can't have visitors without an escort – that's what Jesus does for us. He makes it possible for us to enter Heaven, and the Spirit of God who dwells in us is our escort who accompanies us everywhere we go.

Number four, notice the completeness of His suffering. He **suffered once for us**. He said on the cross, **it is finished!** There are no more sacrifices. You can't upgrade your salvation plan and get more storage. The sacrifice that saved you is the sacrifice that sustains you. And that's important to know. Because you're going to keep sinning your whole life long. Now hopefully it becomes less and less intentional over time, but you need to know *with confidence* that the same gospel that saved you, sustains you. It was true when you were a little girl, true in the early days of marriage, and it's true when you fail to be the mom you hope to be. Mom, Jesus **suffered once for you**. Your circumstances and challenges may change, but your Savior does not. Repent, lather, repeat.

And finally, number five, notice the triumph of His suffering. Notice (vs 22) that Jesus is now seated [at the right hand of God](#), that Christ the crucified has become Christ the crowned. Notice that [angels and authorities and powers](#) are subject to Him, including your president, your politician at every level, your boss, your boss's boss, your spouse, your parents – mom, even you – are subject to Christ. We love you, we want to obey you, so let us see Christ in you.

There is nothing and no one who is not under the authority Christ, which, as we have said so many times, is why we can exercise derivative submission fueled by defiant faith.

Life on earth is hard, there are times when we suffer, from our own choices or from the choices of others. Maybe you had a great mom who pointed you to Jesus and tried her best to live like Him, or maybe you had a terrible mom who taught you what you don't want to be like. Maybe you're struggling to be a mom, or to be a good mom. It's not easy. Life is not easy. It's full of suffering.

But, it can also be full of fellowship, with one another, and with Christ our Lord who knows our suffering and struggles, who endured them for us and with us, and did it all to save us. Let us [arm ourselves](#) with this knowledge, let it change our lives, and let us, together, seek to know and worship Him.

Let's pray.

I love you church, God loves you; now go love Him, & love others in His name – and tell your mom you love her.



Application and Discussion Questions

1 Peter 3:18-4:6

Christ's Suffering Produces Blessing For Us

Summary: In one of the most hard-to-understand passages in the Bible one thing is clear: Christ's suffering produces blessing for us.

- How do you know that God loves you? What evidence do you point to? Is there anything about God that makes you 'feel' loved?
- Do you feel like this passage of Scripture is hard to understand? Why or why not?
- What other passages are confusing to you?
- What do you do when you have questions about Scripture? What tools, resources, or people have been most helpful to you in understanding the Bible?
- Have you been baptized? Share the story of where it happened, who was there, and what were the circumstances leading up to it. If you have not been baptized, why not?
- Have you experienced a conversion that led you to separate from the people you used to hang out and sin with? Was that difficult?
- Have you experienced peer-pressure to conform to the crowd or the awkwardness of trying to separate from their activities? What have you learned about handling these situations?
- Why is it important that "the suffering Christian must always remember he has a suffering lord"?
- What will it look like in your life to apply what Peter says: [Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind...](#)
- We concluded with five observations, which stands out to you?
 - The fact that Jesus understands your suffering – He also suffered
 - The purpose of Jesus' suffering – the Just for the unjust
 - The result of Jesus' suffering – He suffered to bring us to God
 - The completeness of Jesus' suffering – He suffered once for us
 - The triumph of Jesus' suffering – He is at the right hand of the Father